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ABSTRACT

The New York State Board of Regents and the State Education Department have approved a plan to implement a written licensing examination as the first step in a process to professionalize teaching. However, important issues and questions are raised when considering this testing component, such as: (1) the questionable validity of tests already in existence; (2) the impossibility of testing for commitment, enthusiasm, sensitivity, and collegiality; and (3) the difficulty of designing an ideologically neutral test of educational knowledge which will separate the competent novice teachers from the incompetent ones. One result of a licensing exam might be a narrowing of faculty philosophies, so that courses would be designed to match those philosophies established in prior exams, thus increasing conformity, and possibly dissuading the most creative students from pursuing education as a career. Other problems inherent in licensing exams can be found in the National Teacher Examination, which contains questions that trivialize the profession, and which make no contact with the art or the science of teaching, which is cogent testimony for the use of validity studies. A valid means of evaluation are internship programs, but they should be bolstered by training in supervisory skills. (Author/FG)

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The Charade of Testing Teacher Competency: Relevant Criticism for the New York State Education Commissioner's Task Force on Teacher Education and Certification

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In late 1975 an Education Task Force was appointed by former New York State Commissioner Nyquist to focus on the problems arising from the 1974 Regents Competency Based Teacher Education Mandate. While there was discussion of CBTE, the Task Force focused its concerns more broadly on the quality of the teaching candidate and his/her sequence of preparation.[1] Ensuing from this focus were eight recommendations, the primary four of which were the following:

1. That teaching be legally defined as a profession
2. That a Professional Practices Board be established
3. That a licensure system be established in place of the present certification system
4. That full licensure require a sequence consisting of a bachelor's degree, a licensing exam, an internship, and a master's degree.[2]

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[1] The University of the State of New York, The State Education Department, Office of Higher and Professional Education, Recommendations of the Commissioner's Task Force On Teacher Education, Albany, N.Y., April 1, 1977, p. 10.3.

[2] Ibid., p. 10.8.

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In the fall of 1978 the State Education Department was authorized by the Legislature and Governor to proceed with the"Teaching As A Profession Project," and a preliminary report was prepared to both define the issues to be considered in a proposed system of licensing teachers and to analyze alternative solutions.[3] In May 1980 the New York State Board of Regents approved a plan to establish the first state-wide teacher-licensing exam.[4]

This integral part of the "Teaching As A Profession Project" calls for the design and utilization of a paper and pencil exam to provide a more objective assessment of competent teaching. Important issues and questions are raised when considering this testing component of the licensure process, especially when we consider the ultimate criteria of the merit of the State Education Department's Proposals: Will testing for teacher competence improve the quality of teaching?

One relevant group who were omitted from the Task Force--classroom teachers--might answer in the negative. As difficult as it is to believe, not one member of the Task Force was solely employed as a classroom teacher. Amongst the 21 Task Force members, represented were teacher unions, education students, college administrators and faculty, superintendants, board of education officers, parent association officers, and one department chairperson.[5] Who represented, for example the 60,000 teachers in

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[3] The University of the State of New York, The State Education Department, Teaching As A Profession: A Preliminary Report to the Board of Regents On Professional Recognition, Rights And Responsibilities, Albany, N.Y., July 1979.

[4] New York Times, Regents Approves Statewide Tests of New Teachers.SectionB1,p.1. Friday, May 23, 1980

[5] Recommendations of the Commissioner's Task Force on Teacher Education and Certification, p. 10.6.

New York City who daily teach and learn with one million children? If teachers had been part of the Task Force, would they have supported competency testing?

The Task Force explored as a testing model the New York City licensing exam[6] notwithstanding that this city's school system is one of the most problem riddled in urban America. In addition, the Buffalo testing model[7] is explored, acknowledging that neither school system has ever attempted validation of their licensing exams.[8] What the Task Force presents its public with is an analysis of testing programs which may in fact be demonstrating only that whoever scores the highest on an invalid test receives hiring priority. The Task Force readily admits that validity assertions "could easily be attacked in litigation."[9]

The Task Force states that it may be too expensive to develop a new test to be used for licensure, and therefore suggests the possibility of using an existing test, the National Teacher Examination,[10] an exam whose validity is yet to be established. This suggests two questions: Is teaching licensure really considered important by the New York State Education Department if it is reluctant to spend sufficient money to develop a test which will, in their words, separate competent from incompetent teachers? How does one justify utilizing an exam with no established validity data as a mechanism which will determine the professional lives

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6 Ibid., attachment, "Testing For Entry Into The Profession of Teaching." Office of Post Secondar, Assessment and Testing, pp. 4.19.

7 Ibid., p. 4.27.

8 Ibid., pp. 4.24 & 4.29.

9 Ibid., 4.31.

10 Ibid., p. 4.8.

of thousands of people?

If the New York State Education Department should overcome the money hurdle in its efforts to develop a teaching competency exam, what will the content of the exam include? The Task Force acknowledged the impossibility of creating a paper and pencil test which would assess some teaching qualities[11] such as commitment, enthusiasm, sensitivity, and collegiality--all important dimensions which remain resistant to objective measures of assessment; therefore, what remains is the knowledge dimension of teaching, i.e., that knowledge which is most worth knowing for competent novice teachers. If this is to be the thrust of the licensing exam, is it possible to extricate this knowledge dimension from the particular ideologies of the test designers? If it cannot, then the most fundamental questions become: Who will design the test? What life experiences have they had? Who are their employers?

I will suggest by focusing on the following hypothetical test questions relevant to knowledge, children, teaching, and evaluation--key dimensions of any teaching licensing exam--that an ideologically neutral exam is an impossibility:

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[11] Ibid., p.4.1.

1. Knowledge will give your students the ability to

A. understand things
B. do things
C. actualize oneself
D. change society
E. all of the above
F. none of the above
G. two of the above--please circle
H. three of the above--please circle

2. Individualized instruction is a technique that should be

A. ignored
B. valued
C. both of the above
D. none of the above

3. The child should be viewed as

A. missing something of worth
B. having something of worth
C. both of the above
D. none of the above

4. Teacher effectiveness can be measured according to

A. accurateness in presenting discipline
B. efficiency in getting students to achieve goals
C. facilitating growth and development
D. getting students to accept and act upon a utopian vision
E. all of the above
F. none of the above
G. two of the above--please circle
H. three of the above--please circle

Also consider the biases of the professor of law who prepared a statement of adverse impact for the Task Force, when he writes that competent teachers for minorities should be teachers "who will assist the youth in learning how they can develop and participate fully in a society which is better prepared to receive them than it was to receive their parents."[12]

[12] Ibid., p. 5.29.

These hypothetical questions and statement hopefully illustrate the difficulty of designing a test of educational knowledge which will be both objective and function to separate the competent novice teachers from the incompetent ones. All schools and departments of pre-service undergraduate education are comprised of faculty who design lessons and field experiences sifted through their own philosophical and ideological screens. Consequently, this ideological pluralism would have to be recognized in test design. Without this, students exposed to certain philosophies and ideologies would be unable to pass a test which is narrowly conceived. What may logically ensue as a result of New York State using this type of exam to evaluate the quality of pre-service programs, is a commensurate narrowing of acceptable faculty philosophies and ideologies, so that courses, competencies, and experiences will be designed to match those established in prior exams. The resulting conformity may persuade our most creative and intellectual students to turn away from education as a profession, providing college and school systems with far fewer outstanding teaching candidates, and thus undermining one of the few benefits of a shrinking employment market, i.e., the few psoitions available would be awarded to outstanding candidates.

In addition, this greater centralization of power in the hands of the State Education Department, coupled with the new Department of Education at the federal level, may further erode the power of the individual to select educational alternatives within a public system of education. The rather narrow spectrum of curricula materials, i.e., textbooks, workbooks, readers, and multi-media programs produced by a few publishers and utilized by most school systems, is already acknowledged. Now the implementation of a state test utilized for licensure may create learning environments where not only is the content, or the "what" of education narrowly circumscribed, but also the teacher, the "who," the person who modifies and interacts with the "what" in order to create a curriculum.

This is not meant to be a "Brave New World" scenario, nor a critique of possible hidden agenda, yet this outline inescapably suggests that a mechanism which tests for competence may include components which will undermine the original impetus for the creation of such a test, i.e., the improvement of teaching performance in public schools.

Of course the test designers do have the option of creating an exam whose questions are so irrelevant to a job analysis of teaching that the exam will neither adversely impact any one

ideological group, nor screen competent from incompetent teachers. Prior National Teacher Examinations demonstrate its capacity for this. Hundreds of questions could have been selected to demonstrate this point, but these three may provide the profession with reasonable doubts as to the advisability of using any N.T.E. examination:

1. The University of Berlin furnished many men to United States institutions of learning to improve

   A. scientific scholarship
   B. teacher-training
   C. grammar schools
   D. elementary education
   E. musical education[13]

2. Jealousy of a classmate's relation to the teacher may be manifested by

   A. daydreaming
   B. nail biting
   C. withdrawing
   D. high achievement scores
   E. low test scores[14]

3. If you were asked to describe the Winnetka Plan, which one would be the most important aspect?

   A. The grade promotion plan
   B. The individual work centers for the"common essentials"
   C. Accelerated promotion techniques
   D. The emphasis on the three R's
   E. Subject laboratories for job contracts[15]

That these N.T.E. questions, and hundreds like them, trivialize the profession, make no contact with the art and science of teaching, and provide no real way to separate the

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[13] Albertina Abrams Weinlander, How To Prepare for the National Teacher Examination, Woodbury, N.Y.: Barron's Educational Series, 1971, p. 71.

[14] Ibid.

[15] Ibid., p. 21.

competent from the incompetent teaching novice, emerge as cogent testimony as to why the profession should urge validity studies of each area of the National Teacher Examination before it is ever used for any of the purposes outlined by the Task Force.

This critique of the Task Force's proposal for improving the quality of public education must also acknowledge the more encouragingly relevant internship component.[16] There is probably greater unanimity of acceptance within the profession of the idea that novice teachers should serve a full year's internship period as part of their non-tenured appointment in a school district, than there is for any other component of the Teaching As A Profession Proposal. Part of the rationale for this acceptance is that "internship" is congruent with the concept of "profession," in that it implies that teaching is difficult and demands competence evaluation of attitudes, skills, and knowledge via on-the-job development and application.

In addition, the Task Force omitted discussion of an existing mechanism for the improvement of teaching: teacher supervision. The degree of importance of the responsibilities of supervision is only matched by its degree of difficulty. In order for supervisors

[16] Teaching As A Profession, pp. 4.6-7.

to become a more effective component in fostering quality teaching, there is a need for the following:

1. In-service and graduate training in supervision to provide supervisors with a greater data base for clinical supervision of their staff; and
2. More school time to schedule teacher observations, and pre- and post-conferences with teachers.

Acknowledging the importance of supervision, some school districts have created intermediate administrative positions in their secondary schools in order to provide for greater supervisory impact. A typical junior high school may have two such positions, one for its humanities division, and the other for math and science. Each division coordinator would be responsible for curricula leadership and implementation, evaluation programs, teaching two classes, and supervision of personnel.

A final note. Many teacher trainers who were involved in the development of Competency Based Teacher Education programs are questioning the New York State Regents and State Education Department's propensity to mandate change based upon little or no data base. For example,

many colleges are graduating either their first or second class of students from their CBTE programs, and are only now beginning to receive data regarding the relative effectiveness of these programs. Yet, even before conclusions can be drawn from these data, the Regents is mandating another change in teacher education. Policy formulation without such data demoralizes and alienates the teacher education constituency. It is due time that charades end and the serious business of educating a future generation of successful teachers begins.

At issue over the next few months will be not only the ability of the New York Board of Regents and State Education Department to lead in the implementation of a suitable model for the professionalization of teaching, but also their own ability to sustain legitimacy as policy making groups representing thousands who are responsible for millions. Study of CBTE program graduates, quality internships, and improved supervision will assist the Regents in its efforts; mandating a paper and pencil competency test may undermine these.

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